



Fact Sheet

OFFICE OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

Gendered and Non-binary Pronouns: Guidelines for Usage

The University of Massachusetts Boston is committed to valuing and validating the gender identity and expression of members of the campus community. Gender identity refers to an individual’s internal sense of gender, regardless of the sex assigned to them at birth or the sex designation on their legal documents. One way that UMass Boston seeks to create gender-inclusive academic, living, and work environments is by encouraging all members of the campus community to indicate the pronouns they use for themselves, if desired, in classes, residence halls, workplaces, and other settings, and by encouraging members of the campus community to respect these pronouns.

It is important to ask for pronouns because you cannot assume how someone identifies their gender based on their appearance. Using the wrong pronouns for someone may lead them to feel disrespected, invalidated, and marginalized.

Pronouns: Definitions

A pronoun is a word that is used instead of a noun or a noun phrase to refer to individuals. Pronouns can be in the first person singular (I, me) or plural (we, us); second person singular

or plural (you); and the third person singular (e.g., she/her, he/him, they/them, ze/hir) or plural (they/them).

Gendered pronouns specifically reference someone’s gender: he/him/his or she/her/hers.

Non-gendered or non-binary pronouns are not gender specific and are often used by people who identify outside of a gender binary. The most common set of non-binary pronouns is they/them/their used to refer to a single person (e.g., Jadzia identifies as genderqueer; they do not see themselves as either female or male). Other non-binary pronouns include ze (pronounced “zee”) in place of she/he, and hir (pronounced “here”) or zir (pronounced “zer”) in place of his/him/her (e.g., Jadzia runs hir own business, but ze is more well-known as an author).

“It” and “he-she” are often used as slurs used against transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals. You may use them if specified by the individual.

Common Pronouns

This following chart is not exhaustive, so always be sure to ask about someone’s pronouns!

Subjective	Objective	Possessive	Reflexive	Example
She	Her	Hers	Herself	She is speaking. I listened to her. The backpack is hers.
He	Him	His	Himself	He is speaking. I listened to him. The backpack is his.
They	Them	Theirs	Themselves	They are speaking. I listened to them. The backpack is theirs.
Ze Ze	Hir Zir	Hirs Zirs	Hirself Zirself	Ze is speaking. I listened to hir. The backpack is zirs.

Pronoun Etiquette

The best way to ask someone about which pronouns they use

The best way is the most direct. You can simply ask, “What pronouns do you use for yourself?” or “What pronouns should I be using for you?” Asking for pronouns may feel awkward at first, but getting someone’s pronouns wrong may be even more awkward.

If you or someone else makes a mistake

It’s okay! Everyone slips up from time to time. If you use the wrong pronoun for someone, you can say something like, “Sorry, I meant they,” and continue your conversation.

If someone else makes a mistake, in most cases you may gently correct the person who made the mistake without further embarrassing the individual who was misgendered. You can say something like, “Actually, Jadzia uses ‘they’ for themselves.”

Suggestions for Faculty to Respect the Gender Identity of Students

Small Classes

In small classes, faculty members may elect to use various methods to give students the ability to indicate their pronouns, including:

- Offer the option for students to introduce themselves, giving the name and pronouns they use for themselves if they choose;
- Offer the option for students to turn in a sheet of paper that indicates the name and pronouns they use for themselves if they choose;
- Give each student a sheet of cardstock to create a placard with their name and pronouns (if they choose) on it that they would then set in front of them.

Large Classes

In large classes, faculty members are unlikely to be able to learn every student’s name and pronouns. In such classes, faculty may elect to simply avoid referring to students by gender. For example, if a faculty member wants to acknowledge something that a student has said, the instructor may refer to the person using “they” (“as they said . . .”) or by gesturing to the student and using “you” (“as you said . . .”). A faculty member may also elect to avoid calling on students by gender. For example, instead of calling on “the woman in the back of the room” to ask or answer a question, an instructor can call on “the person in the purple sweater in the back of the room.”

A Pronoun Policy

Faculty members may choose to have a name and pronoun policy on their syllabi, such as the following:

Name and pronouns: Everyone has the right to be addressed and referred to by the name and pronouns that correspond to their gender identity, including the use of non-binary pronouns (such as “they/them” or “ze/hir”). Class rosters have a student’s legal first name, unless they have entered a preferred/chosen first name on WISER. Pronouns are not included on rosters, so students will be asked to indicate the pronouns that they use for themselves whenever they are asked to share their names (a student is not obligated to provide their pronouns, though). A student’s chosen name and pronouns are to be respected at all times in the classroom.

Pronoun Do’s and Don’ts

Do

- Recognize that everyone has pronouns they use for themselves, not just trans people. Asking pronouns is very important so that someone is not misgendered and so that trans people are not the only ones who will feel the need to share their pronouns.
- Ask people the pronouns they use for themselves whenever you ask people their name, such as when you meet someone for the first time or when you do go-arounds at meetings. Keep in mind that people may change the pronouns they go by, so it is necessary to ask pronouns in go-arounds regularly.

Don’t

- Refer to pronouns such as they/them/their or ze/hir/hir” as “gender-neutral pronouns.” While some trans people identify as gender neutral, many see themselves as gendered, but as gender nonconforming. Better language is “non-binary pronouns.”
- Describe the pronouns someone uses as preferred pronouns. It is not a preference. The pronouns that a person uses are their pronouns and the only ones that should be used for them.
- Say male pronouns and female pronouns. Pronouns are not necessarily tied to someone’s gender identity: some trans people use “he/him/his” or “she/her/her,” but do not identify as male or female, respectively.
- Indicate that you don’t care what pronouns are used for me, if you are a cisgender person. Such a statement reinforces the privilege that many cis people have in not needing to worry about the pronouns that people use for them—that they are not going to be misgendered. It also invalidates the experiences of trans people, many of whom struggle with getting people to use their correct pronouns.

This is a living document as terms and proper use can change. Feedback is welcomed.

If you have questions, go to the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Resource Page: www.umb.edu/odei